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Developments in Indochina

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Developments in Indochina

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Government forces continue to move closer in their attempt to recapture the Le Minh Ranger camp near the Cambodian border in Pleiku Province. Opposition groupings are casting about in an effort to become legalized before next spring's deadline.

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Recruiting Drives

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An extensive publicity campaign--including spot radio and television appeals and leaflet drops--has been launched to recruit and draft 25,000 new troops for the Cambodian army's general reserve. The effort has the backing of President Lon Nol and is under the direction of Public Works Minister Thappana Nginn.

Officials in Phnom Penh are updating registration lists and sending out draft notices while members of a special staff under Nginn's direction will monitor the

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induction process and report abuses. The cabinet has approved free rice rations for general reserve troops. US officials in Phnom Penh are keeping pressure on the government to make the program as effective as possible.

Nginn has devoted considerable energy to implementing the first phases of the program, but the results will not be known until later this week when the first draftees are ordered to begin reporting to their local review boards. A number of civilian officials in Phnom Penh have already expressed doubt that complete registration lists can be obtained and predict that only a small number of those called will respond. These officials are also claiming that coercive measures may eventually be necessary to fill the military manpower quota.

The government has had much better luck in obtaining recruits for the recently established Republican Police, which is to replace the National Gendarmerie as the civilian police force. Over 5,000 new police officers have been recruited for this force, which is due to begin full operations early next year. They still lack a director, however, as well as an adequate budget and equipment. The Republican Police also is in danger of becoming a political football because it was set up at the insistence of Prime Minister In Tam--who sees it as a means of reducing the army's internal security role.

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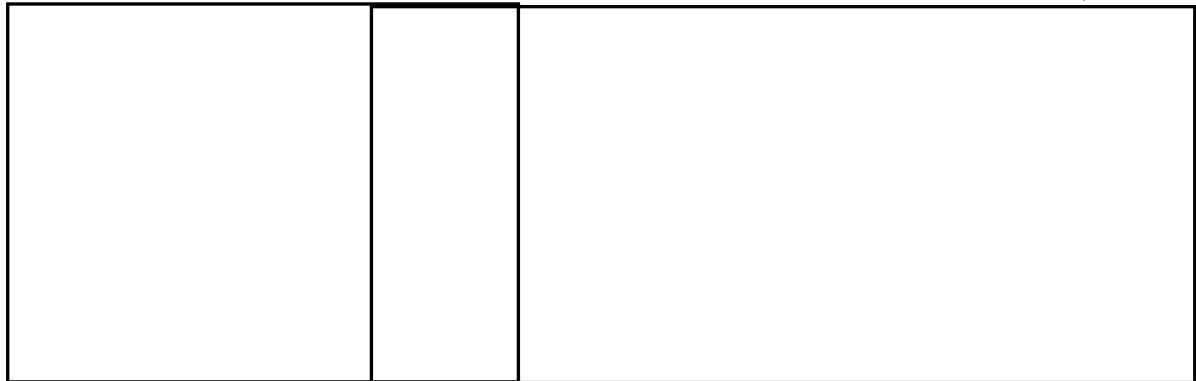
Plei Djerang: The Politics of Repossession

South Vietnamese troops in the central highlands are making measured progress in an operation to retake the Le Minh Ranger camp at Plei Djerang, near the Cambodian border in Pleiku Province. On 22 September, the Communists took the camp in the largest defeat dealt government forces since the January cease-fire. A column of about 7,000 government troops has now moved by road to within five miles of the camp, meeting little resistance; there have been only two brief skirmishes, involving few casualties on either side.

The government advance has been slow and cautious, apparently in an effort to ensure that the onus for fighting in the Plei Djerang area falls on the Communists. Government sources have publicly protested the fall of Le Minh camp as a major Communist breach of the cease-fire and as the prelude to a coming enemy offensive. As part of the effort to muster support for the government counter-operation a recent popular demonstration by "several thousand" persons was held in Pleiku City. Protests over the Communist capture of Le Minh were delivered to the Military Region 2 Commander, Major General Toan, and to the Communist delegations on the International Commission for Control and Supervision. The government seems anxious to avoid a repetition of the recent Trung Nghia operation in Kontum Province, where they were accused of cease-fire violations in retaking two villages that the Communists had captured in June, well after the cease-fire.

There has been little evidence to date that the Communists have fortified Le Minh, and they may choose not to contest the government's effort to retake the camp.

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Political Party Activity

With the government now in firm control of both houses of the National Assembly, one of the few legal avenues open to the opposition for challenging President Thieu is the organization of political parties. Two opposition parties that have provisional legal status, the Social Democratic Alliance and the Freedom Party, are still trying to meet the stiff membership criteria needed to achieve full status by the deadline next spring, but their prospects appear doubtful. Both are threatened by internal rivalries, as well as by the maneuvers of leaders of Thieu's Democracy Party.

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The Social Democratic Alliance, a coalition of seven independent factions, is setting up chapters in the countryside, and some of its leaders reportedly are optimistic that it can recruit enough members to meet the requirements for full legal status. But there is little sign that the factions have put their individual identities aside in order to form a truly united body. The two largest groups, the Progressive Nationalist Movement and the Farmer-Worker Party, are still vying to become the dominant force within the Alliance. Moreover, leaders of the two Hoa Hao factions reportedly have made overtures to the government indicating a willingness to leave the Alliance and join the Democracy Party.

The Catholic-oriented Freedom Party apparently is facing even more difficulties than the Social Democratic Alliance. The Freedom Party has done little organizing

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outside of Saigon, and some of its original leaders reportedly have decided to withdraw from the party. One maverick Catholic senator is trying to launch a rival party, but he is unlikely to get much support.

Both of the provisional parties have lost members to the Democracy Party, which now has an extensive and well-disciplined organization based largely on the bureaucracy and the army throughout most of the country. Some independent and opposition politicians undoubtedly are discouraged by these defections, as well as by the Democracy Party's strong showing in the local village elections and the Senate election earlier this year.

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